

E A R L Y I N F L U E N C E S

# NAT KING COLE

BY JOHN SWENSON AND DAVID MCGEE



NAT KING COLE DID plenty to justify his nickname. He was a true superstar (even before the word was coined) whose enormous appeal transcended boundaries of race, age, gender and musical preference. Landing eighty-six singles and seventeen albums in the Top Forty between 1943 and 1964, he recorded ballads, jazz instrumentals, foreign language songs, Christmas carols, pop standards and what might now be termed pop rock. But Cole's legacy is far more substantial than is suggested by his impressive sales figures or by his imposing reputation as a vocalist nonpareil. Those who know him only by "Nature Boy," "Mona Lisa," "The Christmas Song" and "Ramblin' Rose" have no concept of how truly regal Cole was. A child prodigy on piano, Cole followed in the footsteps of the great Earl "Fatha" Hines to become one of the greatest jazz pianists in history. He was also an extraordinary songwriter, penning such classics as "Straighten Up and Fly Right."

Cole was born in 1919 in Montgomery, Alabama, and his family moved to Chicago when he was four. He started out singing and playing organ and piano in his father's church. In 1936 he began performing as the keyboardist in Eddie Cole's Solid Swingers, led by brother Eddie and also featuring two other Cole brothers, Fred and Isaac.

Eventually resettling in Los Angeles, Cole formed a highly influential drummerless trio with guitarist Oscar Moore and bassist Wesley Prince (later replaced by Johnny Miller). The King Cole Trio proved so popular that jazz giants Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson, among

others, copied the group's style. The trio signed to Decca in 1940, then moved to Capitol in 1943, and through films, recordings and concerts, Cole's popularity increased. When he began to sing as well, his reputation grew with each new warm, personable vocal performance. Soft, but possessed of backbone, Cole's airy baritone was easy on ballads, ebullient but controlled on uptempo numbers, the diction always precise, the phrasing smart. He so stamped material with his signature reading that it's impossible to imagine any contemporary singer being able to work meaningful changes on Cole's songs.

For all of his success and notoriety, however, Cole's life was rimed with tragedy. His decision to abandon his status as a jazz instrumentalist to pursue a career as a pop star resulted in derision by rivals and colleagues jealous of his ability to reach a mass audience. But if Jackie Robinson was applauded for breaking the color barrier in major-league baseball, why did Cole have to face ridicule for becoming the first African-American television star? Cole's TV stardom was met with vicious, well-organized opposition from a racist corporate establishment: Despite the critical approval and high ratings that met his NBC television show (1956-57), a boycott by advertisers bent on stopping a black man from starring on television persuaded the network to cancel the program.

An international star who had another twenty years of potential, Cole died from lung cancer at the age of forty-five in 1965. No one knows what his final legacy could have been, considering how much he accomplished in the short time he was here. What is certain is that he remains one of the greatest popular-music vocalists of the Twentieth Century.





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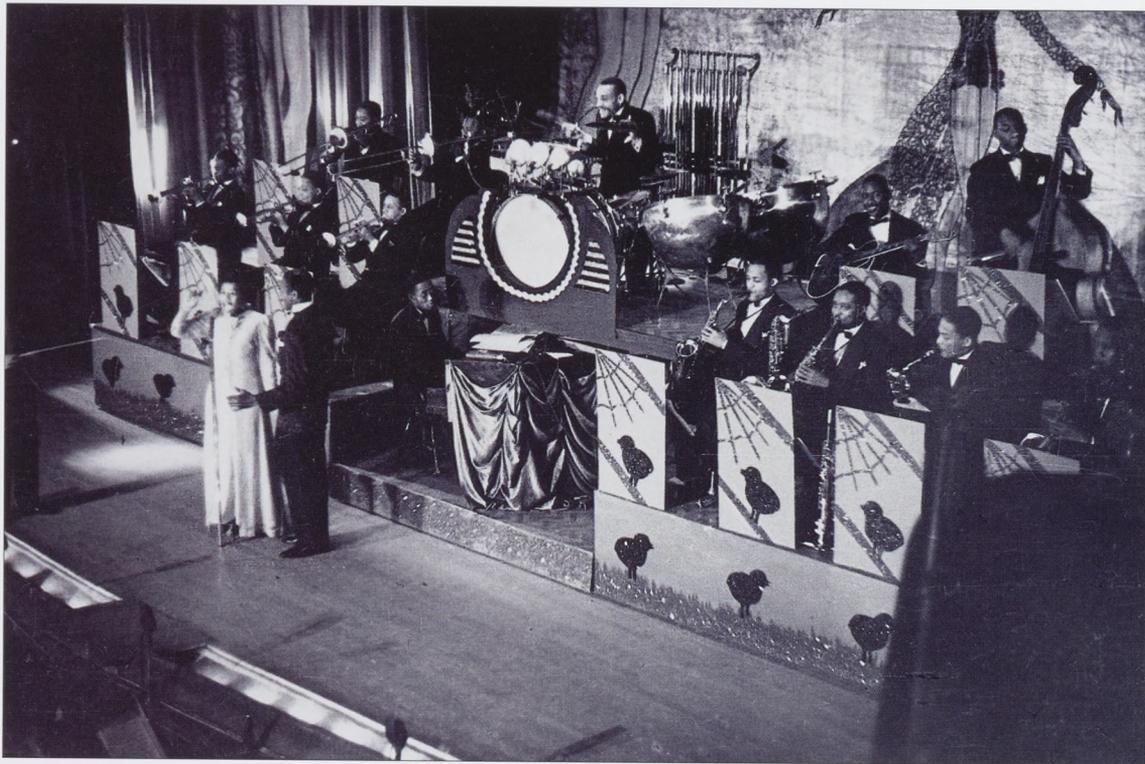
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ON THE HISTORIC STAGES OF THE APOLLO, THE REGAL AND OTHER GREAT THEATERS PRESENTING BLACK ENTERTAINERS, A MESSAGE OF INTEGRATION AND RESPECT ACCOMPANIED DECADES OF GROUNDBREAKING MUSIC.



WITHIN AFRICAN-AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE, THEY were the highest musical peaks an entertainer could attain. They towered above all else, Olympian in reputation and influence, and they brought forth gods and legends. Their names still resonate with mythic and imperial import. For over a half century, these theaters united



black America, providing a cultural lifeline in an age when all was separated geographically and segregated racially. They were home to generations of brilliant performers and haven to the most demanding – and appreciative – audiences. In

CHICK WEBB  
BAND AND ELLA  
FITZGERALD,  
1937; APOLLO  
CHORUS, 1938

New York City, that haven was the Apollo Theatre; in Chicago, the Regal, and in Washington, D.C., the Howard. Baltimore had the Royal, in Detroit it was the Paradise. Philadelphians went to the Earle, and later, the Uptown; Watts residents frequented the

Lincoln, and Memphis music fans convened at the Daisy.

While Jim Crow reigned outside, Cab Calloway – or Big Joe Turner or Isaac Hayes – trucked, rocked and funkied inside. With an uncommon freedom, black audiences could cheer and jeer, scream and laugh at the vast variety of talent: Swinging big bands and small-group jazz musicians; southern soul singers and Motown's finest; Chicago bluesmen and

New York doo-wop groups; gospel choirs and theatrical troupes; tap dancers and comedians.

That same license of expression extended to the performers. Sam Cooke gently swinging, "Bill Bailey won't you please go home?" for a white, supper-club audience at the Copa was one thing. James Brown belting out "Please, please, please, please, please . . ." while falling on his knees at the Apollo? Now that was a chorus of a different color.

The litany of names that drew the crowds to these fabled halls is staggering in terms of magnitude and importance: Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Louis Jordan, Dinah Washington, Nat King Cole, Muddy Waters, Ruth Brown, Ray Charles, the Drifters, the Supremes, the Miracles, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, Sam and Dave, the Jackson 5, the O'Jays, Al Green and the list goes on. In the end, with the music these acts engendered and the generations of

musicians they influenced, they proved to be so much more than names on historic marquees. To black and white America alike, they became our lives, our shared cultural bloodstream and our common musical history.

That cultural timeline began down South. TOBA (Theatre Owners' Booking Association, or alternatively, Tough On Black Asses) had evolved from a loose collection of traveling minstrel shows at the turn of the (last) century. TOBA led black artists out of a rough beginning of tent shows and into the theaters and dance-halls of larger, Northern cities.

White – and black – showbiz men woke up to the lucrative possibilities of establishing venues that staged black enter-





tainment; box-office revenue started to flow, as black – and white – patrons began pouring through the doors of these first experiments in social integration. In Harlem, for example, the white habit of “slumming” uptown reached its zenith during the Twenties, creating small fortunes for the owners of the Cotton Club, Small’s Paradise and the Apollo’s progenitor, the Lafayette Theatre. But there was economic safety in numbers, which led to the push for 1,500-seat (like the Apollo and the Royal) to 3,500-seat (the Regal) houses and a grander, more elegant chain of theaters presenting bigger and better

known stars. By the 1930s, almost every city with a healthy middle-class black community boasted a high-quality venue presenting the top tier of national talent in a safe and race-friendly environment. The grand old man of the black theater circuit was – and still is – New York’s Apollo Theatre.



Its story is representative of that once-vibrant family.

Born at the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance, the Apollo has remained a monument on 125th Street since it first opened on January 26, 1934. Formerly Hurtig and Seamon’s Music Hall, the Apollo drew its name from a nearby burlesque house, which referenced the Greek god of music in an effort to pose striptease as a respectable, “artistic” pursuit. Seeking a new, full-family approach, the Apollo Theatre’s opening night sparkled with multimedia promise. There was a jazz lineup (Benny Carter and seven other acts), a feature film (*Criminal at Large*), the debut of a new P.A. system from RCA and the pledge of establishing “an entertainment edifice that Harlem will take pride in showing off to neighborhood communities.”

But the “Uptown Met” – as it was soon dubbed – was born into hard times. Founded by a real-estate man with little flair for showbiz in the midst of the Depression, the Apollo was bought out within a year by a white Jewish family who ran it with an all-black crew, one of the first theaters to do so.

With a creative booking policy and tight box-office control that would have schooled even Bill Graham, Frank Schiffman – and later his son Bobby – ensured that the Apollo rose above all competition. By 1935, “the Apollo changed its billing to ‘the Only Stage Show in Harlem’ . . . after Schiffman vanquished the other black theaters,” historian Ted Fox pointed out in his book *Showtime at the Apollo*.

Schiffman juggled headliners with savvy and timing, allowing their respective audiences to gather the financial means for the next big show. Smooth, sepia-toned crooner Billy Eckstine would headline one week, drawing one type of crowd, followed by R&B queen Dinah Washington, bringing in her own followers. Then the Soul Stirrers would arrive, filling the seats with a more sanctified audience than either singer would ever pull.

The Apollo – with a winning formula in hand – soon reached out to its sister venues in other cities in developing an A-level of black entertainment. “From the TOBA circuit, black performers moved up to the big league in black entertainment,” noted Fox, “which included . . . the Royal Theatre in Baltimore, the Howard in Washington, D.C., and the Earle in Philadelphia.” But there was only one theater leading the pack, as singer Ernestine Allen recalled: “You could make it at the Howard or the Royal, but you never, never, never really made it until you made it at the Apollo.”

Years flew by and musical fashions changed. The Apollo chorus line shuffled offstage never to return. Swing and big bands segued into boogie-woogie and bebop. Jump and jive

TOP: THE 1941  
APOLLO CHORUS;  
LEFT: BILLIE HOLIDAY  
ENTHRALLS  
THE APOLLO, 1937

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**BLUE NOTES**

**DOC BAGBY AND BAND**

**Irwin C. WATSON**

bands later yielded to a legion of doo-wop, R&B and soul groups. But a thematic, multi-act philosophy never fell out of favor on 125th Street. As late as the Sixties, it was possible to catch a jazz-filled evening with Nancy Wilson, Cannonball Adderley, Slappy

White and Ramsey Lewis, or wait for a multicultural night featuring Miriam Makeba, Mongo Santamaria, Willie Bobo and Richard Pryor.

At the Apollo, it was never just about music. All-around entertainers like Sammy Davis Jr. saw to that.

Vaudeville acts like Pigmeat Markham and the toothless Moms Mabley served up down-home humor with biting social commentary, paving the way for newcomers like Redd Foxx, Dick Gregory and Bill Cosby. Such hoofers as Bill

"Bojangles" Robinson, Cholly Atkins and Honi Coles introduced new steps and styles to the African-American dance vocabulary. Even boxing legends Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson developed stage routines and brought them to Apollo audiences.

Years before *Star Search* or *The Gong Show*, emcee Ralph Cooper developed and hosted the Apollo's Amateur Night, certainly the theater's longest running and perhaps best-known tradition. It was an evening that either broke hearts or launched new stars such as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Ruth Brown, Jackie Wilson, Little Willie John, Roy Hamilton and Dionne Warwick. During the theater's heyday, every Wednesday night featured comic "executioners" ready to exit the less talented wanna-be's, a live radio broadcast and the promise of discovering new talent: Agents regularly flocked from their midtown offices with blank contracts and pens in hand.

By the Sixties, audio technology and the uncommon confidence of one R&B singer converged to make live recordings at the Apollo possible and profitable. James Brown recalled in his autobiography: "I wound up paying for recording *Live at the Apollo* out of my own pocket. We had opened on the nineteenth and were building up to recording on the twenty-fourth, a Wednesday, which meant amateur night. I wanted that wild amateur night crowd because I knew they'd do plenty of hollering." Recorded in 1962, the album climbed the LP charts to Number Two and became the best-selling album of Brown's career, setting off a run of live recordings from black theaters. Also taped at the Apollo, *The Motor Town Revue, Volume 1* appeared a year later and featured the Miracles, Supremes,





Contours, Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder.

As usual, other theaters followed the Apollo pattern. Recorded live at Chicago's Regal Theater in 1963, Little Stevie himself first pounced up the charts with the exuberant "Fingertips (Part 2)." The Regal similarly provided a launch point for Gene Chandler's plaintive "Rainbow '65," as well as B.B. King's legendary *Live at the Regal* album of the same year. Brown chose Baltimore's Royal as his 1963 Apollo followup, *Pure Dynamite!* A decade and a half later, in 1978, the Brides of Funkenstein opted to record the landing of the Mothership at Washington, D.C.'s Howard Theater.

The days of disco were not kind to the black theater circuit. "The Apollo is, of course, the crown jewel of the chitlin' circuit," Teddy Pendergrass recalled in his memoir, *Truly Blessed*, but added: "By the early 1970s, the Apollo's better days were long behind it." There were a number of reasons: Economic devastation in the inner cities reduced a once-proud urban middle class. Box offices were hard hit, and decreasing interest in older musical styles only added to the injury. With the advent of TV's *Soul Train* and the ascent of disco, fewer people wanted to pay for live entertainment.

Only a handful of the great black theaters survived the Seventies. Though it hit bankruptcy in '79 (after a brief incarnation as a movie house) and continues to be embroiled in financial controversies, today the refurbished Apollo reaches for its past glory under new ownership, with Amateur Night still inviting tomorrow's stars to the stage on Wednesday nights.

As for the other theaters, Chicago's original Regal was torn down, its name adorning a smaller, 2,300-seat replacement since '87. Detroit's Paradise was remodeled and renamed Orchestra Hall. The Daisy in Memphis has been reopened to

Beale Street tourists and a new generation of audiences. Baltimore's Royal and Philadelphia's Uptown are both history, with a small plaque marking the former's past triumphs. But when these great theaters were in operation – selling out shows nightly – they fulfilled an essential role in the creation of modern-day rock & roll.

Ted Fox opened *Showtime at the Apollo* with a prophetic moment: It was 1955, and the theater's marquee promised a panoply of R&B

talent on one bill – Bo Diddley, Bill Doggett, Etta James, Dakota Staton, Willis Jackson, the Flamingos, the Harptones, the Four Jacks and Howlin' Wolf. Elvis Presley, recently signed to RCA and seeing New York City for the first time, made the pilgrimage to 125th Street by taxi. "He drew little notice from the predominantly black crowd hanging around . . . there were plenty of other white youngsters about, and even his perfectly sculpted, slicked-back pompadour, black pants and pink shirt did not set him apart." One can almost see him, slightly nervous, buying his ticket, finding a seat and then settling in for a joyous ride. As did Presley, so did white America – slowly, eventually, proverbially – take that trip uptown to embrace and draw inspiration from a rich African-American heritage. On the Apollo stage, a message of integration and respect accompanied the decades of great, timeless music that flowed forth. Today, in the culture-hopping, genre-defying, post-modern maelstrom that finds room on the same stages for Lauryn Hill, Lenny Kravitz and Eminem, that truth remains self-evident: Anyone can get a front row seat and any deserving performer can get top billing.

FANS SURROUND  
CLYDE MCPHAT-  
TER AND BILLY  
WARD OF THE  
DOMINOES, 1952